

# CONCEPT

THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

### Being critical, creative and collective: Renewing radical Youth Work

**Tony Taylor**

*This article first appeared in Concept Volume 18, Number 1, 2008.*

*“I’ve never thought of myself as a radical, but the other day I was accused of being one because I asked a question.”* Thus spoke a quizzical youth worker participating in a workshop, ‘Is there a history of radical youth work?’ at the 2007 History of Youth & Community Work Conference. The lively discussion sparked by this cry of confusion moved me to ponder, exploring anew the possible character of radical youth work today. Hoping not to patronise the worker’s bewilderment, I looked to argue that whilst questioning is vital, it is hardly the sufficient condition for being radical. I flirted with writing a Draft Manifesto! However it was not long before doubts set in, some serious, some self-indulgent. Then I dithered as I heard myself caressing clichés and trotting out truisms as if it was still 1977 not 2007.

Thinking historically though was helpful. It took me back to an illuminating moment in 1984 at the height of the great miners’ strike. At a Community Education conference in Leicestershire the question was posed, “are you a radical youth worker?” To the consternation of those present, Malcolm Ball known as a troublemaker, on and off the campus, on and off the picket line, responded in the negative. “No”, he continued, “I am a radical who happens to be a youth worker.” In cold print this reply may seem unremarkable or a mere play on words. Yet my own experience suggests this distinction is profound in its implications. Within Youth Work I have met only a minority who have grasped its significance.

Immediately it implies that being radical, imagining and striving for a revolutionary transformation of society, is something that touches every part of our lives. Though I have fallen well short of the mark it means that I’ve tried to be a radical companion, a radical parent, a radical trade unionist and, hopefully, a radical youth worker. It suggests that being a radical youth worker is not some cloak of identity to be worn at work, only to be divested



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

on the way home to the travails of 'ordinary' life. It stresses that being radical rests ultimately on the existence of supportive groups, however small, inside and outside of work. It demands our involvement in the (re)creation of social movements opposed, if you'll forgive a clumsy but useful definition of yesteryear, to racially and sexually structured patriarchal capitalism, dressed nowadays in its global neo-conservative garb. For the sake of brevity I will call this plurality of social and political struggles, the Radical Project.

So I'm going to test out some thoughts on the reciprocal relationship between the overarching Radical Project and Radical Youth Work. It will be my contradictory contention that without the Radical Project, Radical Youth Work is an illusion, but that Radical Youth Work could be an influential thread within the Radical Project itself. My starting point is that both the Radical Project and Radical Youth Work are haunted inevitably by similar dilemmas, although I will speak largely to the Youth Work side of the coin.

### Having a Vision

Imagination, passion and commitment are vital. Embracing together a vision of emancipation from the chains of capitalist consumption, dreaming that 'another world is possible', is crucial. Yet such an optimistic outlook is derided as utopian. The contemporary arrangements for life are held to be the final solution. Our Market-given Western leaders claim that this is as good as it gets and the rest of the World is going to get it, like it or not. An arrogant pragmatism prevails. The tactics are behavioural, people being objects, in need of management by diktat. Sadly this pessimistic perspective is insinuating itself deep into the character of Youth Work. By and large both management and workers have abandoned purpose and philosophy in favour of the banality 'do what works'! In this claustrophobic climate, youth workers who defend an unpredictable practice rooted in dialogue with young people are dismissed as politically naïve. Feeling isolated and disillusioned is a distinct danger. In arguing for a Radical Youth Work vision, 'informed by political and moral values: opposition to capitalism and authoritarianism, belief in equality and respect for the environment', Tania de St. Croix challenges us to decide which side we are on. 'Unless we want capitalism and social control to become permanently entrenched in the work, neutrality is not an option'. [St. Croix 2007]



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

### Theory and Practice

However proposing the necessity of a shared sense of political purpose begs more than a few questions. It returns us to the theory-practice divide criticised caustically as ‘actionless thought’ versus ‘thoughtless action’ [Ledwith, 2007]. In pursuing this further, following Castoriadis [2005], I am inclined to be suspicious of Theory as it is usually constructed, which is not the same as being hostile to Thinking, forever thinking. In particular social and political theory is so often the imposition of an explanatory template upon the shifting complexity of social relations. This dogmatic tendency, exemplified by Leninism, but to be found in Feminism too, has played its part in weakening the vitality of the Radical Project. It is reflected in Youth Work, where the negative response of many youth workers to the ideas served up to them in Training is not as ‘anti-intellectual’ as is often suggested. In reality, faced with young people on a street corner or wherever, youth workers conclude that the theories advocated without sufficient argumentative debate in the institutions, make no better sense than that mainly conservative ragbag of ideological bits and pieces called common-sense. Toeing the Party line has damaged deeply the Radical Project. Imposing a correct professional line, informed by the pyrrhic victory of Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Discriminatory perspectives, forgetful of class, has undermined the growth of Radical Youth Work.

In the last fifty years the Radical Project has been rejuvenated, shocked and divided by the demands of the social movements based on gender, race, sexuality and ‘dis’ability, but has also retreated problematically from class. In the light of this contradictory experience how might we build a formidable movement of humanist solidarity, which remains ever alert and sensitive to the differently exploited and oppressed within its ranks? From the 70s Youth Work was thrown into turmoil by the impact in particular of feminist, black, gay and ‘dis’abled workers. Yet the advances dissipated as the radical agenda was recuperated, alongside the system’s incorporation of some of its leading advocates. Neither the Radical Project nor Radical Youth Work require disciples of a particular theory or ideology, but rather philosophers, who interrogate ceaselessly whatever ideas or proposals are put before them, in the service not only of interpreting the world, but of changing it.



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

### A Radical Psychology

The Radical Project has never been informed by a Radical Psychology. This failure to develop a deep and useful understanding of why individuals think and act as they do, a working insight into how personality is formed, has caused great harm. I grew weary in Marxist circles, in the trade unions, of arguing for the importance of a more informed feel for how individuals tick, when all I got in return were crude dualist assertions about human behaviour more at home in the pub or kitchen than the corridors of the working class's supposed leadership. For a brief period I threw myself into a short-lived affair with the likes of Rogers and Goffman, but it ended in tears. To my mind they did not grasp the inextricable relation of individual and society, captured in Marx's thesis that 'the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations' [Marx, 1977]. Ironically, Youth Work itself, given its desire to be a profession of adolescent psychologists, has foundered on the shortcomings of its eclectic mix of social psychological generalisations, largely ignorant of the relations of exploitation and oppression. It pains me to reflect that I have not found youth workers as a whole to be any more insightful about why young people do this, that, or the other than anyone else.

Common-sense stereotypes dominate discussion. Of course I need be wary of slamming the door shut on the oft-hidden world of voices of practice, full of complexity and contradiction [Spence, 2007]. It would be fruitful to pursue this research further and indeed expose my failure perhaps to see the positive even when it's staring me in the face! However I do maintain that Radical Youth Work cannot take for granted that somehow the Youth Work basics are right; that Youth Work possesses an adequate grasp of social individuality, backed up by all the necessary communicative skills; that all it has to do is breathe some politics into the profession's technical excellence. In my view there is a tragically neglected body of thinking, featuring such folk as Seve, Vygotsky, Elias and Castoriadis, which strives to overcome the present dichotomy between individual and society [Burkitt, 1991, Castoriadis, 1997].



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

I harbour hopes that a revitalised debate about the social and political self, our struggle to be personally and socially autonomous is possible, within which those of us from youth and community work, adult education and teaching might be leading participants.

### **Against Hierarchy**

Notwithstanding, for example, anarchist and feminist efforts to be otherwise, the history of the Radical Project is blighted by our inability to resist the certainties of hierarchy and the bureaucratisation of our attempts to organise. I am not blaming in the time-honoured way a treacherous leadership betraying the cause. Rather I am emphasising the insidious hold on our individual and collective consciousness of the socially created belief that without authoritarian structures, without strong leadership, without an army of experts, society could not function.

In this context the task of organising inclusively, ‘horizontally’, in ways that guard against the tendency to authoritarianism but also enthuse through their appropriateness, is a requisite for the re-emergence of the Radical Project. Interestingly Radical Youth Work, drawing on the ‘non-directive’ tradition, ought to have something to say in this debate. At the same time it must criticise and oppose both the bureaucratisation of Youth Work’s structures and of the very relationship of youth worker to young person. It must challenge the instrumental imperative of ‘new managerialism’. Uncomfortably, it ought to confront its own profession, the closed ranks of a group which claims to have a special expertise on the basis of its own rhetoric and illusions. Radical youth workers have much more in common with, say, radical teachers or social workers than with the majority of their own profession, who are embracing, willingly or otherwise, an agenda of social conformity.

### **Democracy, the Power of the People**

Rethinking Democracy is at the heart of the Radical Project. This makes it all the more disappointing that a great deal of argument about this abused concept rarely goes beyond proposals for improving representative democracy itself. This perspective cannot see beyond an elected House of civic-minded souls, who in some mystical way will truly represent the people, even though the system itself remains the same. To put it plainly, there can be no democracy without economic equality, without Aristotle’s citizens capable



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

of both governing and being governed. In the meantime Radical Youth Work must struggle for direct democracy in the workplace and for direct democratic control by young people over resources. It will criticise the charade of consultation and participation within which power remains firmly in the hands of councillors and managers. To argue this is not utterly far-fetched. A large number of adults and young people are rightly disillusioned with the barrenness of democracy as presently practised. It is not our job to return them to the passivity of the fold set aside for them by the ruling class. In contrast we have to explore ways of making decisions in which all those affected participate, to put in place ways of keeping our representatives under proper manners. We can only become more democratic by forever trying it out, by doing democracy.

### Doing it for Ourselves

To mean anything the Radical Project will rest on our own self-organisation. Learning on the past, the inspiration of workers' councils and autonomous women's groups, learning from the present, the dissenting groups at the G8 Summit, we will work out in concert creative ways of managing our affairs. Radical youth workers will emphasise their own self-organisation, independent of their paymasters, but most crucially, they will prioritise support for the self-organisation of young people, reclaiming the future for themselves [Waiton, 2007]. The truth is that such a stance remains rare across Youth Work, precisely because it is threatening to so many quarters, not least the profession itself.

Underpinning such an emphasis on 'doing it for ourselves' is a commitment to a radical pedagogy, to self-reflective activity, to a never-ending mutual quest 'to identify, explore, reflect upon and resolve, individually and collectively, issues and contradictions in **our** social existence' (my change of pronoun: Moir, 1997). That we struggle to do so is no surprise. Capitalist society seems to hold all the cards, imposing a closed agenda, declaring that its norms and values are the Last Word. However, as ever, the basis of our resistance, the desire to create a way of living together that is always up for grabs, is rooted in the myriad of major and minor moments, wherein people refuse to do as they are told.

### A Plea



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

Radical Youth Work, subversive and oppositional in its intent, cannot exist separate from the Radical Project itself. But, in developing our own critical praxis as educators, we can do something for ourselves and offer an important contribution to the wider political struggles, which make up the Radical Project. As usual, this is easier to say than do - *'all I did was ask a question?'* The bottom line is that in our efforts to be critical, creative and collective, we need one another or we are lost.

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Malcolm Ball, who is still stirring things up and to Tania de St. Croix, who led the workshop at the History conference of Youth and Community Workers for their stimulus.

### Tony Taylor

Tony is a formerly a youth worker, trainer, senior manager and lecturer. Tony acts presently as the Coordinator for the In Defence of Youth Work campaign, which seeks to make the continued case for youth work as informal education, "that is volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees".



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

### References

- Burkitt, I. [1991] *'Social Selves: Theories of the Social Formation of Personality'*, London: Sage
- Castoriadis, C. [1997] *'The World in Fragments'*, edited and translated by David Ames Curtis, Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Castoriadis, C. [2005] *'Figures of the Unthinkable'*, edited and translated anonymously as a public service at <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis.html>
- De St. Croix, T. [2007] *'Taking Sides: Dilemmas and Possibilities for 'Radical' Youth Work'* at <http://www.critically-chatting.0catch.com/recentarticles/index.html>
- Ledwith, M. [2007] 'Reclaiming the radical agenda: A critical approach to community development', *Concept*, 17/2
- Marx, K. [1977] *'Selected Writings'*, edited by David McLellan, Oxford: OUP
- Moir, S. [1997] 'Theory in Practice; Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Youth', *Concept*, 7/1
- Spence, J. [2007] 'Youth Work: An Everyday Journey', at <http://www.critically-chatting.com/recentarticles/index.html>
- Waiton, S. [2007] 'Does youth have a future?', *Concept*, 17/2